

E-mail and Domains: The New Business Cards

By Manny Tau, PsyD

E-mail has become the primary means of non-verbal communication in the United States as millions of e-mails traverse wired and wireless paths each day. It has become not just a common practice, but now an expectation to have one's e-mail address on his or her business card. E-mail has developed into its own language and protocol, significantly deviating away from the protocols of the traditional letter.

E-mails often have signatures, the contact information that is automatically added to the end of each message. This is very powerful. It is like having your business card in someone's face with every e-mail correspondence, especially if you have a website that is easily accessed by the recipient clicking on the URL (website address).

An e-mail address and the format of an e-mail message are like a business card regarding impression management. The following are some thoughts for your consideration when using e-mail technologies in your professional correspondences.

Avoid using a proprietary e-mail account.

Proprietary online services (e.g., AOL) are not the Internet. They offer many features available only through their service like Instant Messaging, as well as a portal (gateway) to the Internet. This is where many problems start. Each uses a proprietary e-mail protocol that is problematic with its handshake onto the Internet. They are notorious for lost e-mails and difficulties with e-mail attachments, such as a MS Word document or a graphic file, and are common targets for hackers. They are also viewed as personal services, which is why it is rare to see businesses and corporations with proprietary e-mail accounts. It is like handing out flimsy and perforated-edged business cards that you printed yourself.

Use plain text in your e-mails, avoid using HTML

HTML is *Hypertext Markup Language*, the code underlying all web pages. E-mails using HTML can have custom features like formatting, variable fonts and embedded graphics. HTML can also have scripts that will gather data on you or drop scripts or information into your computer (cookies) that can invisibly relay information back to the advertiser (e.g., *DoubleClick*, *AdTracker*). Sending an HTML e-mail to someone who has it turned off in their e-mail client can lead to formatting problems with the recipient, thus making your e-mail problematic and difficult to read. Remember, e-mails are documents that can be saved, or printed out and distributed to others.

Obtain an e-mail account with a true ISP

This can be a dial-up or broadband (DSL/cable) account. Examples of providers are *XO*, *SBC* (PacBell), *Earthlink*, *Cox*, and *DSLExtreme.com*. Use an e-mail prefix that is easy for others to remember and avoid combinations of characters and numbers commonly seen with many e-mail accounts. The common protocol in the corporate arena is `firstnameinitiallastfullname@providerdomain.com`. The shorter the e-mail address, the better. You want people to be able to intelligently guess your e-mail address if they wrote it down wrong or have misplaced it.

A much better solution is to purchase your own domain.

It is good practice for a professional to purchase a domain of his or her name or the name of his or her business entity. This controls who uses your name on the web. You don't want someone else to own a domain using your name. You might want to own not only the **.com** version, but also the **.net** and **.org** versions too. For example, `http://whitehouse.gov` is the U.S. President's website, but `http://whitehouse.com` is a pornography site. Yes, the serving President has the e-mail address of `President@Whitehouse.gov`; quite impressive. Owning your own domain will allow you to purchase and set-up an e-mail address of your choice. You own the domain (the suffix), so you can choose any prefix (the part before the @). For example, I use **mt@mannytau.com** for my personal e-mails, and **mtau@nothreat.com** for my professional e-mails. Having your own domains and attached e-mail

accounts will also give you the advantage of not being victimized by an ISP disappearing or changing protocols due to mergers. Your domain/e-mail accounts are separate from whatever ISP you use to gain online access. In short, your e-mail address does not change when you change online access providers. While you are at it, registering and owning a domain will also allow you to have URL forwarding (a.k.a., website forwarding).

Use your webspace.

Many of you who have an e-mail account with an ISP also have 5MB to 10MB of included webspace for your own website. If you have a Cox account, the e-mail account of yourname@cox.net has an associated website with the URL of <http://members.cox.net/yourname> (though you have to activate this webspace through Cox.net's web-based user's area/control panel). Having URL forwarding attached to your domain can point to this long and hard to remember URL, and simply redirects your chosen domain name to the URL assigned to you by your ISP. I highly suggest you take advantage of this and create a web presence, a web "business card" of your services and anything else you would like to convey to current and prospective clientele. Printed brochures and media kits are rapidly being replaced by websites. The Microsoft Office suite of software includes *FrontPage*. It is an easy to use web page/site generator that is not difficult to learn, and its functions are similar to that of a word processor.

Have a throw-away e-mail address.

I mentioned earlier that I have a personal and a professional e-mail address (I actually have many). I strongly suggest that you have multiple e-mail addresses. At minimal have three, one for personal use, one for professional use, and one for spams. This is to facilitate the routing and organization of incoming e-mails. More information on these strategies perhaps with a future article. The spam e-mail address is an important one. Often while surfing the web, there are features that require an e-mail address to login for sign-up or access. Use the spam e-mail address. This "throw-away" non-important e-mail address will be the one databased and vulnerable to marketers and advertisers and will be the one that will be spammed, thus leaving your personal and professional e-mail accounts uncluttered. There are many free e-mail accounts available, (e.g., *Yahoo* and *Hotmail*), although you will be inundated with spams and advertising embedded in the e-mails from these providers.

Use anti-spam software!

Unfortunately this has become a necessity. *Spamnet* (<http://www.Cloudmark.com>) is a free utility, and integrates seamlessly with MS *Outlook* (by far the most commonly used e-mail client) and does a great job identifying spams and placing them into a spam folder for your quick review and deletions. Also, check out *Ad-aware* at <http://www.lavasoftusa.com> for their free anti-tracking software. You have to run this manually, but it does a great job scanning your computer for ad-tracking scripts and cookies, and gives you the option to delete them. You'll be amazed at how many it will find. The first time I ran this program, it found approximately 75 files that were from marketers and advertisers. I currently use both of these programs and find them highly effective.

I hope that you find this information useful for your considerations. As professionals, it is incumbent upon us to be educated and expertised with any information and communication technologies utilized when servicing our clients. *Due diligence* is the operative concept here. It is also incumbent upon us as professionals to convey our professionalism not only through our face-to-face contacts, but also through our electronic contacts.

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Award at the 2003 Annual Convention for his many contributions to the Association and to professional psychology.